

MEIR LITVAK: *Shi'i scholars of nineteenth-century Iraq. The 'ulama' of Najaf and Karbala*. (Cambridge Middle East Studies, no. 10.) xiv, 255 pp. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998. £37.50, \$59.95.

Most of the books on Shiism which have appeared since 1979 have focused on the contemporary situation and the recent history of Iran, trying to explain how a phenomenon as strange as the Islamic Revolution could have occurred at the end of the twentieth century. It is only more recently that the scope of interest has extended to other aspects of modern Shiism as well. As a result of this, a number of important works—e.g. by Y. Nakash and Ch. Mallat—have been devoted to Iraq, which is after all the country in which Shiism originated more than 1,300 years ago. The most recent study of this kind is the book under review by Meir Litvak, a previous version of which had been submitted as a Ph.D. thesis at Harvard University.

Litvak's masterly work is nothing less than a comprehensive study of an important and interesting phase of Shiite history, because the developments in the shrine cities (*'atabāt*) during the nineteenth century largely contributed to laying both the sociological and the theological-legal foundations of contemporary Shiism. It is there that Khomeini's concept of *wilāyat al-faqīh* was conceived for the first time. Litvak's prosopographical method, with which he looks at the '*ulamā*' class as a whole, is based on meticulous scrutiny of a large number of biographical dictionaries. Although these sources have in principle been well-known for a long time to everybody working on Shiism, Litvak reads them from a different point of view and manages to form a cohesive picture out of the hundreds of dispersed pieces. After an introduction (pp. 1–18) in which he summarizes the role of the Shiite '*ulamā*' and the history of Shiism and of the shrine cities up to the nineteenth century, the first chapter (pp. 21–44) offers an overall portrait of the

community of learning. Great emphasis is laid on the key role of the informal social networks that had to be built up by any scholar who desired to rise to fame and influence. Because of the scarcity of significant endowments (*awqāf*) and the impossibility for Shiite scholars to occupy posts in the Sunni-dominated administration, the *'ulamā'* were totally dependent on the pious donations they received from believers. Only a far-reaching network enabled them to procure the financial means necessary to establish madrasas, support the poor, and grant stipends to students, who were in turn financially dependent on their teachers. The greater the *mujtahid's* network the more students he could afford, and after terminating their studies and returning home they further enlarged the *mujtahid's* network. This system of clientalism (Litvak calls it 'a scholarly version of an extended household', p. 26) led to an atmosphere of jealousy among the students and constant rivalry for money among the *'ulamā'*. It created, moreover, a multilateral dependence between the *'ulamā'* and the bazaar (who made financial contributions and donations), the students and the *'ulamā'* (who granted stipends), but also between the *'ulamā'* and the students (who were necessary for network-building). The final result was 'an amorphous but not necessarily fragile system of socialization and social control, based on unwritten rules and conventions' (p. 43)—a patronage system, however, that always remained open to talented newcomers from outside the *'ulamā'* group, as these were never (and were never intended to be) a closed circle. Allegiance to a *mujtahid* was always personal, the death of a teacher inevitably meant the dissolution of his network.

The following three chapters (pp. 45–95) trace the development of Shiite leadership in the nineteenth century and the emergence of Najaf as the main centre of learning. Litvak describes the transition from the domination of Arab *'ulamā'* (mainly from the Kāshif al-Ghiṭā' family) to Iranian *mujtahids* (Muhammad Ḥasan al-Najafī, Murtaḍā al-Anṣārī, Mīrzā Ḥasan al-Shirāzī), the decline of Karbalā' after the suppression of the 1843 rebellion, the centralization of learning in Najaf (with the ephemeral exception of Sāmarrā' under al-Shirāzī), and the subsequent politicization of the *'ulamā'* after the tobacco protest in 1891–92. He hardly touches upon theological or juridical problems, the content of the books written by his protagonists is only rarely discussed (e.g. pp. 66, 72ff). In spite of his emphasis on the importance of the scholarly works, most of the titles do not even turn up in the bibliography. Litvak's theme is not the development within Shiism, but the development of the Shiite *'ulamā'*. Therefore he concentrates on the institutional and social aspects that determined the position of the scholars. And he never forgets the human factor, the constant jealousy and rivalry, the struggle for money and influence, the smugness of some, but also the ascetism and the sense of responsibility of others. Some traits, e.g. of Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Najafī, like his constant network and patronage building, his endeavours with regard to public relations, his denigration of rivals, may even remind the reader of some parallels within our own scientific com-

munity. A very important by-product of this continuous inner-Shiite struggle was the rapidly decreasing tolerance of those ideas and currents that went beyond mainstream Shiism. In particular movements that appealed to public yearnings for a more spiritual leadership, like Sufism, the Shaykhī school or Bābism, instantly met with fierce opposition from the part of the 'orthodox' *'ulamā'* who did not even shrink from the dangerous anathema of *takfīr*. Litvak explains this—convincingly, in my opinion—by stating that the *'ulamā'* acted more and more like a church in the sociological sense that seeks to destroy possible religious alternatives, if necessary even by resorting to the power of the (Ottoman) state (pp. 47ff, 58ff, 144ff).

In the second part (pp. 115–78), Litvak tells the story of Shiism at the *'atabāt* once more, this time with regard to the *'ulamā'*'s relations to the world outside, i.e. the Mamluk and (after 1831) direct Ottoman rule, the British and the Qajar state of Iran, but also with the mafia-like gangs in the shrine-cities themselves. The fact that the Shiite scholars belonged to a persecuted minority in Iraq, yet at the same time formed an important part of the dominant religious forces in Iran made these relations more often than not fairly complicated. The real power of the *'ulamā'* was limited: they were helpless in the face of the Wahhābī raids on the *'atabāt* at the beginning of the century, they had to accept the re-establishment of direct Ottoman control in the 1830s and 40s, and when fighting against the ideological and social threat of the Bābīs they even needed the support of the Sunni government. On the other hand, it was the British who intervened against some of the most oppressive measures from Baghdad. Relations with the Qajars were largely characterized by political quietism that only at the end of the century turned into oppositional activism, without, however, questioning the legitimacy of the Qajar state itself. On the whole, the *'ulamā'* fulfilled the important task of acting as urban notables, 'mediating between the local population and the central authorities' (p. 177f).

Statistical tables, a large number of endnotes (unfortunately not footnotes), an extensive bibliography and a useful index round off a book whose only real fault cannot be ascribed to the author: it is totally devoid of any diacritical marks so that some lesser known names cannot always be properly identified and technical terms or citations are only partly useful. Cambridge UP should try to remedy this deplorable state in future editions. Meir Litvak, however, is to be congratulated on having written a brilliant study on a truly fascinating topic.

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